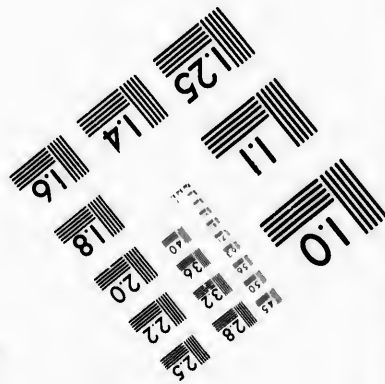
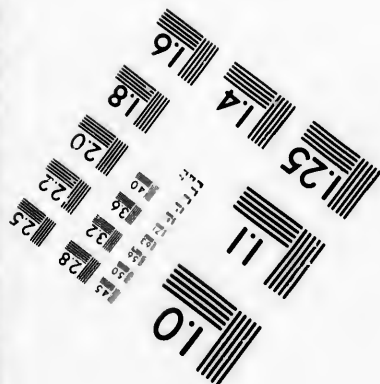
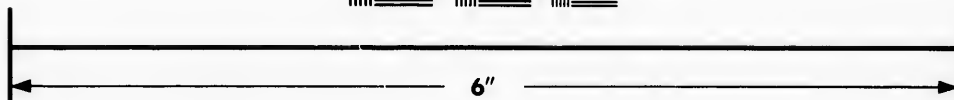
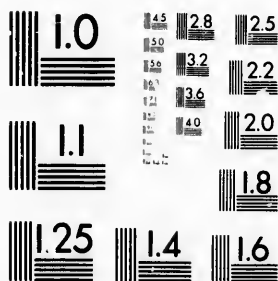


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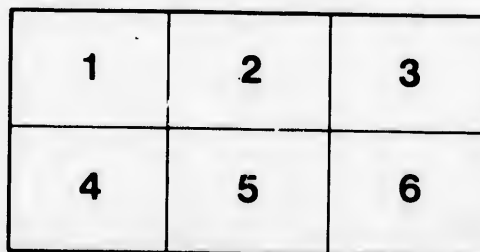
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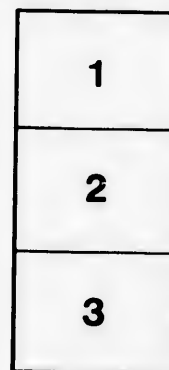
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# he Indian Potlatch



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## The Indian Potlatch

SUBSTANCE OF A PAPER READ BEFORE C.M.S.  
ANNUAL CONFERENCE, AT METLAKATLA,  
B.C., 1899,

BY THE REV. J. B. McCULLAGH,  
Editor of the *Caledonia Interchange*.

When this paper was read at our Annual Conference a resolution was passed asking me to have it published. I now, in a way, comply with that request by printing it in the *Interchange*, together with other matter tending to throw light upon the subject.—E.B.

**T**HE Indian Potlatch presents a most difficult problem, not only to solve for the betterment of the race, but even to understand. Indeed no one who has not been born and reared as an Indian among Indians practising it can rightly comprehend what it all means. Though I cannot lay claim to this privilege (!), yet I have had the Potlatch under close observation for sixteen years, and have studied it on the spot, both in theory and practice, as far as one may do so without actually making one.

But while considering myself thus qualified to speak on the subject, I cannot say that I have completely exhausted it, for there are ramifications connected with it which, I must confess, seem to baffle all effort at investigation.

I think it important, however, to lay before you as much as I know concerning this custom, for it seems to me that upon the thorough eradication of its principles from the Indian mind depends, humanly speaking, the permanency of the results of our work. This I hope to make evident as I proceed.

I would first of all say what the Potlatch is not. It is generally described as a custom, but it is not a custom in the ordinary sense of the word, it is much more. We cannot label it as a habit or usage, it is something quite different; it is very far from being a festival, although to the outsider it may appear as such; it is not a religious rite or ceremony, even though there may seem to be a strain of ancestral worship in it; it is neither an amusement nor an entertainment, however much those who practice it may seek to represent it in that light.

Now, if it may not be classed as a custom, practice or habit; if it may not be regarded as a festival, religious rite or ceremony; if it be neither an amusement nor an entertainment, what is it? I reply it is a systematized form of tribal government based upon the united suffrages of the clans.

Potlatch is not merely the making of a feast where a dance is given and presents made to those attending. If that were all it would be harmless enough, but that is only the outward expression of it. The Potlatch is political as far as this life and this world concern the Indian, and the



event seen by the public is in reality an election.

The articles distributed with so much display as free gifts (with the exception of blankets and calico torn up into small strips) are all returnable within a year or two. They are not gifts, as many people imagine, but vote-acknowledgments — a public recognition of the rank or social status of the voter (who records his vote by his presence) by the Potlatcher who is a candidate for some position, favor or honor in his clan.

But before proceeding further it is necessary to offer some information as to the constitution of Indian society. You are all aware that it consists of three classes—the nobility, gentry, and common people. These are organized into families (or houses), clan-sections, clans, tribes (communities or villages), and confederacies.

A *family* or *house* is a portion or branch of a clan-section. It has its own crest and sub-chief, subordinate to the clan totem and clan-sectional chief, and of itself or in combination with other kindred families forms a complete clan-section.

A *clan-section* is a company of one or more families having the same totem and totemic name, and forming one division of a tribe.

A *clan* is the aggregate of kindred clan-sections having the same totem and totemic name.

A *tribe* is a community of two or more different clan-sections residing in one place bearing a common territorial name, and

governed by the chiefs of the clan-sections in council assembled.

A *confederacy* is an alliance of several tribes for offensive and defensive purposes, and is governed by the united suffrages of the clans in public assembled.

The principal clans of the Nishga Confederacy are the Lak-Gibu (*Lupians*), the Ganhada (*Ranians*), the Lak-Shkik (*Aquilians*), and the Gishgahas (*Cannabians*).

Each tribe on the Naas is composed of a clan-section from each of the above-named clans, so that for the transaction of business (which is chiefly dynastic) in any tribe on the river, it is necessary to summon the other tribes and thus bring together all the clan-sections of each clan in public assembly. And this is the *raison d'etre* of the Potlatch.

Indian affairs are, as I have said, principally dynastic, that is, they have to do with hereditary rights and titles, successions to chieftainships among the chiefs, to a higher social standing among the gentry, and to the "going up one" in the family circle among the common people, for everyone is somebody's junior, and wants to become somebody's senior.

These successions often carry with them substantial emoluments in the way of hunting and fishing rights over certain lands and streams, and are not infrequently a bone of serious contention, sometimes ending in bloodshed.

Then in each clan-section there are many vacant places, filled by men of renown in the good old times when the Indians were

numerous, but now retaining only the name. To fill these vacant places and revive the old names is the one ambition of the surviving members of the clan-section families, and this, like other successions, can only be accomplished by obtaining the united assent of the clans.

Thus there is only one topic of interest in life to these people, only one object for which to live and only one scope for their natural activity, viz., the glorification of self. In each Indian town you will find the clan-sections living together on apparently very good terms, but in reality holding each other down or staving each other off with all the cunning imaginable. Jealousy of one another is the characteristic feature of Indian life, and so socialistic are their ideas that no individual dare improve his condition above the general average, while at the same time each clan-section is consumed with a burning desire to make a better show than any other.

You are all of course aware that members of the same clan may not intermarry. Such a thing, according to Indian ideas, would be an abomination. But it may not have become evident to all of you that notwithstanding this law the majority of Indian marriages are very close as to family affinity. In most families I find it has been the custom of the men for generations to select their wives from one particular clan-section of another but still the same clan, because of equality in rank or from other social considerations. And this may be one reason why the Indians do not increase.

Marriage never unites the man and the woman ; from first to last the parties belong to different clans, and maintain respectively their own social positions. Children are counted in on the mother's side as her elder brother's family, belonging, of course, to her clan. And all rights, titles and property descend from uncle to nephew or niece, and not from father to son. The idea of a widow laying claim to her late husband's property or a son to his father's, would be absurd to the Indian mind. But it is very hard to suppress nature, especially when it is human ; for, in spite of all, the paternal or filial instinct crops out at times and sets up serious complications in this social machinery.

No better description could be given of the Indian people than that supplied by the name they give themselves—*Alu-gigiat*. Truly they are a *Public-people*, for they have no private business, no private rights and no domestic privacy. Every right is *holden* (that is the meaning of the word YUQU, which the White-man, judging from outward appearance, calls Potlatch, (*i.e.*, *giving*) and every matter regulated by a public manifestation of assent on the part of the united clans. And this public expression of assent, made by the clans and acknowledged by the individual is what we call Potlatch. Even babies are legitimized, so to speak, in this way, the naming of children recorded, and their admission to tribal privileges signaled by the same means.

You will observe, therefore, that according to the constitution of the tribes and the distribution of clans, Potlatch, or a system analogous to it, is a necessity, from an Indian point of view, in order to preserve the unity, distinctions and traditions of the race; for one clan-section may not assent to an act except in concert with the other sections; if it do, the act in question is only recognized within that section. And if an individual assumes any right to which he may be entitled, without a public manifestation of assent on the part of the clans, he finds himself in the position of a miner who stakes off a claim without recording it; the next individual in the line of succession may, on going through the usual formalities, jump the other's claim. Sometimes the rightful claimant of a privilege is too poor to call the clans together for their assent, in which case some one else of kin who is better off asserts a counter claim, sends out a runner, calls the clans, and so takes the other's place. When you hear of Indians killing each other, or attempting to do so, it is because of some such reason as this. There lies extant in this system an unlimited possibility of serious trouble, but it is not to be found in the mere giving of a feast or dance, nor even in the distribution and destruction of property, nor in the eating of dog or human flesh; the evil and the roots lie deeper and quite apart from these things.

You will further notice that, although not an idol itself, the Potlatch puts all the idols of heathendom in the shade, for not only

does it swallow up the sustenance of an entire community but the community itself, and only says "Shimoigit !" (Hail, chief!) in return. It consumes five clear months out of every twelve in simply gorging, sleeping and dancing ; the most that any of its votaries can earn is all too little for it ; the money that ought to be spent upon the necessities of life is squandered on this idol, which is feted and glutted to its heart's content, while the poor, the aged, the feeble and the sick lie in poverty, filth and rags—dying for want of a little nourishment.

It is a pitiable sight to behold sick folk, invalids, delicate children and babies travelling to and fro over fifty miles of waste ice and snow, the thermometer perhaps below zero at the time, for the sole purpose of paying and receiving homage before this idol. I have seen dying persons and children suffering from measles hauled about the country in mid-winter on sleds, camping out in the snow at night, in order to be present, or that those on whose tender mercies they were dependent might be present at potlatch ; and I have seen them taken back from potlatch in their coffins.

**3** WILL now give you a brief list of the various functions whereat the presence of the clans is considered necessary :

**1.** On the birth of a child, except the parents choose to have it regarded as illegitimate, so to speak, the sections of both clans—the father's and the mother's—must be assembled, feted and presented with suitable acknowledgments of their rank, etc.

**2.** The naming of a child is another public function. If a boy his ears are pierced ; and if a girl her under lip. But this piercing is dying out. The ceremony cannot be performed privately nor yet within the family circle of one clan section, but must take place at some public gathering of importance, and the social status of each person present must be recognized in a suitable manner.

**3.** When the child has reached the age of seven or eight years it must be signalized or distinguished according to its ancestry, and introduced to the public wearing some particularly prized headdress, an heirloom if possible ; a number of blankets and a quantity of print calico are then torn up and distributed, the pieces varying in size according to the rank of the recipient. This is called " Si Halaid."

**4.** When the child is ten or twelve years of age it is again brought forth for public recognition. A feast is made on a small scale, and a dance given, and again

property is distributed. The child is presented arrayed in tribal regalia, and publicly assumes the charge of some family emblem in the shape of a toy of the monkey-on-the-stick order, which is called a "Naknog," This function is therefore known as "Naknogs."

5. Girls on attaining the age of puberty are set apart to fast four days. The first food they are allowed to taste after this fast is at a feast where all the clan sections of the village are represented. After the feast the attendance of the clans is duly acknowledged by a distribution of gifts. This formality is termed "Ginētqu," i.e., *arising*, after which the girl is considered marriageable.

6. Most Indians are distinguished by tattoo markings on their bodies, the imprinting of which is a great event. These markings generally represent some bird, animal or reptile connected with the totem of a clan or crest of the family, and on the occasion of the tattooing it is usual to take up some further articles of ancestral regalia and another "naknog," besides the assumption of a large amount of self-importance, while a distribution of property is made on a larger scale than hitherto. Only adults are permitted to go through this ceremony, as it leads to a position of some dignity in the public estimation. The custom is called "DUMYE," i.e., *a starting out*. A year afterwards a feast is given when the marks are publicly shown and declared "gwalgwa," i.e., *dried or healed*.



7. In a few years' time the person, if sufficiently well off to do so, goes through a similar ceremony called "O'sk," probably meaning *Motion onward*, at which what the white man would call "a big potlatch" is made. The right to wear some important crest is established on this occasion with a further addition of regalia and, perhaps, more tattoo markings.

8 After an Indian has performed "O'sk" he may have to work hard for several years in order to be able to take the next step, which is called "Oiaġ," *i.e., an arriving*, meaning, I suppose, an arriving at the position of full membership in the clan. It is much the same as Dumyē and O'sk, but on a larger scale, as to the acknowledgments made to those assembled. Further clanship privileges and dignity are conferred or assumed, and the individual emerges a duly enfranchised member of the Confederacy.

As such he is now free to take special degrees of honor such as Mitlā, Lū'lim, Ulalā and Unanā.

The Mitlā is a very simple dance affair, containing nothing objectionable from a moral point of view.

The Lū'lim is a dog-eating degree, when the candidate, having made himself sufficiently mad in the woods—naked and fasting for several days, joins the ceremonial dance and tears a dog to pieces with his teeth before the assembled company, after which he distributes as much property as he is able.

The Ulalā is a cannibal degree, that is to say, the eating of human flesh is its leading feature. It is not so bad as it used to be when slaves were killed, I am told, and dead bodies exhumed for the purpose. The modern method is to get together as much property as possible, fix the date for the dance, then disappear into the woods for a few days cloaked in a bearskin with a bellows-whistle under each arm, and then when the dance is on turn up in a fine frenzy and start in biting those present. On some the biter only leaves the marks of his teeth, from others he will draw blood, while perhaps from others, if he can afford it, he will tear a piece of flesh away. After this beastly fit of voluntary insanity (the highest ambition of the young men!) he will distribute his property among those he has bitten according to the nature of the bite inflicted. It is now two years since the last Ulalā dance was held on this reservation. Let us hope it may never be revived.

The Unanā is a crockery-breaking honor. The candidate having been artistically painted, kilted and feathered, is armed with a club, works himself up into a towering rage, and then proceeds on his mission of destruction, stepping like a high-mettled charger. Entering into each house he goes foaming around breaking basins, plates, lamps, or anything he sees, and having completed his tour makes a grand display of recompensing the owners. Men who have gone through these degrees are not to be lightly esteemed, they are

generally very proud and puffed up with the glory they have acquired.

9. Another legal formality of importance is the Llin. If from any cause an Indian has not been able to go through the various formalities already enumerated he is not considered a member of Indian society proper, and as he cannot go back to childhood and take them *seriatim*, he is allowed to present himself *in toto* by means of this provisional statute called Llin, which consists in obtaining the united assent of the clans in the usual way. Many Indians have renounced Christianity and civilization by this means. If a man puts away his wife, or a woman leaves her husband, the divorce is completed by either or both parties going through the Llin, after which they are at liberty to marry whom they please. And here I might observe that if our civil law recognizes the validity of Indian marriages contracted according to Indian custom I do not see how it can ignore the validity of this custom. I mention this as against, not in favor of such recognition. Even an Indian who has been married according to English law may put away his wife, go back to the heathen community, perform the Llin, take another wife and go about freely without any fear of our law interfering with his liberty. This is one reason why the civilized Indians wish to see the Potlatch abolished.

10. And now we come to what is generally known as *the* Potlatch, but which is

no more potlatch than any one of those functions I have already mentioned. The Nishga term is Yuqu, *i.e.*, a *holding*, and the ceremony is performed in connection with the death of a chief or other individual of rank for the purpose of continuing his name and position in the clan by his heir. It differs in no way from O'sk or Oiag—a feast and distribution of property, after which the defunct chief's nephew is acknowledged as chief. It is also considered necessary for a chief to present himself every four or five years in this manner in order to continue the holding of his chieftainship by a renewal of the public expression of assent:

The building or rebuilding of a house is also considered a necessary occasion for making a potlatch, because it entails the holding of a public position. There is no such thing as *giving* a potlatch, as a white man gives a dinner or a ball just because he wishes to be sociable. A potlatch must be for a purpose, and if there be no *legal* reason (according to Indian law) for giving it, it cannot be given. Only as a candidate for some public position can an Indian appear before the electorate of the Confederacy by making a potlatch.

11. There is another formality connected with the Yuqu called Hōōks. A chief usually gives a Hōōks a year before his potlatch comes off, but as far as I can see it has no special significance except, perhaps, that of putting the electorate in a good humor. There is generally a good deal of folly indulged in at a Hōōks.

There is also liable to be considerable wanton (from our point of view) destruction of property if the friends of the chief giving the Hōōks take it into their heads to do him honor. This they do by making him presents of articles of clothing, etc., but instead of putting them in his hand they put them in the fire, where they are quickly consumed. The chief then and there makes return presents also putting them in the fire, amid rounds of applause. To the Indian mind this is all *comme il faut*.



**H**AVING thus touched upon the various ins and outs of the Potlatch system let us consider its influence upon the Indians.

Among those who practise, its influence is baneful in the last degree; it puffs up while exhausting, and its victims while being destroyed think they are being established; it presents an outward altruistic appearance, but is essentially egotistic; those who practise it think they are the pick of benevolence, whereas in reality they are most selfish; it is fatal to all idea of thrift and comfort in family life—to be thrifty is to be bad, to be economical is criminal; it is destructive of individual

liberty, and, consequently, of the development of the race ; it is inimical to all social progress and education ; although not a religious system it is intensely repugnant to religion, and the civilization of the Indian is an abomination to it ; it produces such a strange condition of society that if we can get in five years' work among the people in twenty years we may claim to do well ; it places our best actions in a false light—while we think we are showing kindness and charity to the poor and needy we are in reality paying homage to exalted personages ; our greetings, salutations and smiles very often appear in the same light ; our efforts for the salvation of souls are nothing less than a hunt for men of title with which to adorn our missions, while everything containing the element of a free gift—and much of our work is of that nature—is liable to appear in the light of a "bid" for favor.

To a people socially organized on potlatch principles it would seem that everything should be presented upside down from our point of view in order to appear right side up to them—refuse a thing, and it at once becomes an object of desire, offer it freely and it is worthless, or you have an ulterior motive in offering it.

As to the Nishgas themselves, divest their minds of this way of thinking and you have really the nicest and best-natured people imaginable.

I must now say a few words about the effect of the potlatch system upon those

Indians who have come out on the side of religion and civilization.

If, after an Indian leaves the Confederacy to join a mission, the potlatch would let him alone all would be well. But it does no such thing. If the man be a chief the potlatch immediately usurps his chieftainship, promotes another chief in his place, takes away his name and title, and ignores him. This is very hard for some men to bear, not so much because of the humiliation as because of the injustice.

If when a Christian Indian dies the potlatch would leave the matter alone much heart-burning would be avoided. But it does no such thing. If the deceased has been a person of any social position some heathen clansman is sure to make a potlatch for the corpse in order to take that position, thus raising trouble among the Christian relatives.

If the potlatch would leave their young men alone the Christian Indians would not be very much opposed to it. But it will not leave them alone; it inveigles them into heathenism, helps them to go through with the Halaid or Llin, and ties them up to debts from which they may not be able to get free for years.

The civilized Indian occupies a strange position. As far as his affairs are concerned the white men—missionaries, Government officials and others, think of him and act towards him as being one with them in their laws and in the rights emanating from those laws (c.f. the Indian Act),

but with the Indian himself it is different. He can only conceive of himself in his new estate according as he finds himself supported for or against what he considers to be his rights and wrongs. If, when he is made to writhe under a sense of injustice, and complains to us only to be snubbed, or to have his grievance made light of from our failure to comprehend them, is it to be wondered at that he feels we have no interest in his welfare? The civilized Indian finds himself in a majority of two to one on the Naas, and yet he cannot get a hearing. He has appealed vainly to the authorities to be relieved from the tyranny of the potlatch, but he has not been understood, and it has not been thought advisable to give him relief, hence it is that the potlatch in a modernized, though no less injurious form, is now becoming as it were a necessity among the civilized Nishgas.

I do not mean to say the Government has made no attempt to help in this matter; it has done so, but in the most deplorable manner possible. It has passed a law (49 V., c. 43, s. 114) prohibiting the potlatch on pain of six months' imprisonment, but this law has never been enforced, and this has had a very demoralizing effect upon the Indians both Christian and heathen. This is where my personal protest comes in.

As to the law in question forbidding Indians to tear up blankets and distribute property, it should never have been passed; first, because there is really no moral harm in tearing up a blanket; secondly, because



tearing up blankets and giving away presents are not the disturbing factor of the potlatch ; and thirdly, because tearing up blankets and distributing property are not in themselves an obstacle to Christianity and civilization. The fact is the law should not have been aimed *altogether* at the heathen Indians ; it should have been partly in favor of and partly in restraint of the civilized community on whose petition the legislation was made.

A chief wishing to become Christian and civilized should have his rights assured to him by law—the Potlatch should not be allowed to deprive him of his rights.

The Christian dead should be made sacred against all Potlatch interference.

An Indian having once left the Confederacy and taken up his position on the side of law, order and civilization, should not be allowed to publicly renounce and so bring into contempt his profession of Christianity and civilization by means of the Potlatch.

No Indian married according to English law should be allowed to put away his wife and marry another woman according to Potlatch authority. The woman should be restrained in like manner.

These are the lines upon which the law against Potlatching should have been framed, and on which it might, with great advantage to the cause of education and civilization, be amended.

It is the duty of everyone who has the welfare of the Indian at heart to protest against the present unsatisfactory state of affairs. If the existing law is to be retained,

enforce it ; if not, take it off the statute book. But if it may not be repealed, let it be amended ; and if it be amended, let it be so amended that it shall touch the core of the evil and ensure relief where relief is wanted, and restraint where restraint is required.



49 VICT., C. 43, s. 114.

1. " Every Indian or person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival known as the ' Pottlach,' or the Indian dance known as the ' Tamanawas,' is guilty of a misdemeanor, and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months and not less than two months.

2. " Every Indian or person who encourages, either directly or indirectly, an Indian to get up such a festival or dance, or to celebrate the same, or who assists in the celebration of the same, is guilty of a like offence, and shall be liable to the same punishment."

47 V., C. 27, s. 3.

58-59 VICT., C. 35, s. 6.

" Section one hundred and fourteen of *The Indian Act* is hereby repealed and the following substituted therefor :—

" Every Indian or other person who engages in, or assists in celebrating, or encourages, either directly or indirectly, another to celebrate, any Indian festival, dance or other ceremony of which the giving away or paying or giving back of money, goods or articles of any sort forms a part, or is a feature, whether such gift of money, goods or articles takes place before, at, or after the celebration of the same, and every Indian or other person who engages or assists in any celebration or dance of which the wounding or mutilation of the dead or living body of any human being or animal forms a part or is a feature, is guilty of an indictable offence and is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months and not less than two months ; but nothing in this section shall be construed to prevent the holding of any agricultural show or exhibition or the giving of prizes for exhibits thereat."

Published by the WOMAN'S MISSIONARY SOCIETY of  
the Methodist Church, Wesley Buildings,  
Toronto, Ont. Ten cents each ;  
one dollar per dozen.



